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ABSTRACT

In the case of community colleges and their students, expectations and outcomes are varied, pervasive, and open to question. The measures of success that are typically applied to senior colleges (e.g., degrees awarded) are not sufficient. While progress toward degree attainment is a valid measure for those recent high school students who aspire to the baccalaureate, it is not adequate for the one-third of the community college students who seek skills enabling them to gain immediate employment, or the 15% who seek retraining or relicensure, or the 15% who take courses only for their personal interest. Clearly different measures must be applied to account for the institutional effects on these various groups. Estimating the college's contribution to its students requires that the students' reasons for matriculating be known. It cannot be assumed that all students in transfer courses want to transfer or that all students in vocational classes want to obtain employment. The only way to determine the primary reasons for students attending college is to ask them in a specific and immediate, rather than a global and open-ended, way. Once the students' goals are determined, efforts can be made to determine whether those goals are being achieved. (UCM)

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ASSESSING STUDENT GOALS AND OUTCOMES

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Presented to the Maryland Deans' Meeting
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ASSESSING STUDENT GOALS AND OUTCOMES

Florence B. Brawer

All types of educational organizations are founded on certain goals that may be translated into expectations for the individuals and outcomes for the institutions. During the elementary school years these goals apply to all students in much the same way. The person completing first grade moves on to second. Students finishing elementary school are expected to continue on to junior high school, and high school graduates are prepared for either work or post-secondary education. As the level of education increases, the picture becomes more varied and the goals and outcomes more complex. Few outcomes are as simple as they were in the earlier years, and most tend to discriminate among various groups of students.

Outcomes are particular to situations and individuals, and they often vary--different institutions as well as different individuals frequently focusing on different outcomes. Further, outcomes might be arrayed in an hierarchical order from most to least desired, and they may change over time. They may also be viewed in terms of immediate and far-reaching outcomes. As an example, a 17 year-old college freshman's initial goal might well be passing his chemistry class, but as he completes his sophomore year, the goal might become transferring to a particular

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university. The outcomes are--did he or did he not pass, and did he or did he not transfer? On the other hand, the person with a baccalaureate degree may see as her goal or desired outcome a job that would utilize the special skills she is currently developing at a two-year college. Other people may entertain such varied goals as remaining in school, raising their GPA, developing different habits and skills, or even just enjoying social experiences in an academic environment.

In the case of community colleges and its students, the expectations and outcomes are varied, pervasive, and open to questions. For example, what does the community college do for its matriculants? How many transfer to universities or obtain employment in the field in which they were trained? How many stay enrolled long enough to complete a program or to satisfy the goals they had when they entered? How much do they learn? What is the degree of satisfaction they express with their academic experience?

These questions are important because, along with other higher education structures, the two-year colleges are being challenged to demonstrate their contributions. And the measures of success typically applied to senior colleges (degrees awarded, for example) are not sufficient. Some community colleges offer lower-division courses for recent high school graduates who aspire to the baccalaureate, a group accounting for around thirty-five percent of their matriculants; progress toward degree attainment is a valid measure for that portion of their effort. But one-third of their students seek skills enabling them to gain immediate employment; fifteen percent seek retraining or

relicensure in a field in which they are already employed; and fifteen percent, many of whom already hold degrees, take college-credit courses only for their personal interest. Half the students take only one or two classes per term. Clearly, different measures must be applied to account for institutional effects on those variant groups.

A few state-level agencies have sought appropriate measures. The state community college boards in Maryland, New Hampshire, and North Carolina, among others, collect data on job placement, salaries, and transfer rates of graduates. For example, in North Carolina a survey of 9,000 former community college students revealed that seven percent felt their training was related to their present occupation and 80 percent reported having attained their educational goals; 15 percent indicated conflicting job goals, 11 percent had obtained a job, and 13 percent had changed their educational goals. (Hammond and Porter, 1984)

Illinois has information based on a five-year longitudinal study of nearly 10,000 students who transferred from two-year colleges to senior colleges and universities (ICCB, 1986). Of these transfers, 31 percent had earned an Associate in Arts or Associate in Science degree prior to transfer, seven percent had earned an Associate in Applied Sciences, and 62 percent had transferred without completing a degree. Persistence rates and GPA's tended to increase commensurate with the number of community college credits earned, a finding that is especially interesting when it is coupled with the fact that 56 percent of the transfers had earned fewer than 60 semester hours at their

two-year college. Despite the potential usefulness of this information, few comparable data sets exist, and many individual college administrators suggest that statewide data mask their institution's contributions to its own constituents.

Staff members in single colleges occasionally collect data on student satisfaction with the college experience, grades earned by students who transfer to local universities, and employment obtained. Cuyahoga Community College's (1987) report about students transferring to the state university, as an example, indicates that more students transferred in 1986 than in 1979 and that most (90 percent) students had been out of school less than a year before transferring. Further, between 1979 and 1982, 32 percent of the students transferring to Cleveland State from Cuyahoga received the baccalaureate degree. Although a search of the files at the ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges at UCLA indicates that such individual college information is scant, community college educators nationwide recognize that they must show evidence of their efficacies.

Outcomes and Research

Today I shall discuss some of the outcomes that community colleges attempt to effect, occasionally noting specific research related to those outcomes. Then I shall talk about the importance of asking students particular questions in particular ways in order to develop a consistent and viable data base.

Measuring educational achievement is by far the most commonly assessed educational outcome at every level of education. It is considerably easier to appraise grade

achievement than to follow students after they have left an institution. The number of passes and failures, GPA for one's entire institutional tenure, comparison of grades earned by one group with another (say, males versus females) are all popular ways of assessing outcomes. Many researchers continue to make these comparisons, and examples of them are manifold.

During the past five years, community colleges have emphasized two outcomes in particular--transfer and retention. Although transfer is an especially "hot" topic now, one that has generated both considerable research and exhortation, and retention/attrition are of somewhat less concern, both are prime issues in any discussion of outcomes. Much of our work at the Center for the Study of Community Colleges has centered on the transfer function. Other research that should be noted here is a monograph by Fred Kintzer and Jim Wattenbarger (1985), which takes a national perspective, and the report of Miller, Janowsky, and Katz (1977) that centers on colleges in a single state.

Studies of attrition/retention have been surprisingly consistent over the years, although the preponderant number of studies of dropouts in community colleges seem to concentrate on students in vocational programs. An example here is a report detailing the findings of a follow-up study that assessed the employment and educational activities of students who graduated or dropped out from community college vocational programs during 1979-1980. (Oregon State Department of Education, 1982)

Satisfaction as a generalized response is another frequently assessed outcome. This dependent variable, satisfaction, may well be a basic personality characteristic, a function of the

person, rather than a situational response. Therefore, different environmental conditions and variable interventions may have little or no affect on the degree of satisfaction that individuals manifest unless they also undergo some developmental changes.

Sorting Goals and Outcomes

Different students, different goals. How to sort it all out? The first premise in estimating the college's contribution to its students is that the reasons for the students' matriculating must be known. We cannot assume that all the students in transfer classes want to transfer or that all the students in vocational classes want to obtain employment.

Many students enrolling in liberal arts classes have no intention of transferring. Students in an art class may already have baccalaureate degrees and be enrolled only so that they may paint or sculpt under the direction of an instructor. Students in a class in child development that is offered under a psychology course title may be there only to gain credentials entitling them to apply for immediate employment in the field of child care. Students in a biology class may be seeking a vocational nursing license, while most of the people enrolled in physical education classes take them for their personal interest. The fact that all those classes carry transfer credit is an artifact of college accreditation, staffing, and financing. It relates to the perceptions or intentions of only a portion of the students who are enrolled.

The question of the number of students who want to transfer

is equally difficult to answer. Not only are the data incomplete, but any student's intentions may be interpreted variously depending on how or when the question was asked. Studies done over the years usually have suggested that around three-quarters of the students beginning higher education in a community college intend eventually to obtain the baccalaureate or a higher degree. In 1929, 80 percent of the students in California junior colleges declared intentions of transferring to a senior institution. Nationally, between 1940 and 1960, the number of those who declared transfer intent hovered at between two-thirds and three-fourths of the student body. In 1983, a survey of students taking classes in twenty-four urban community colleges found 74 percent of them declaring transfer intent (Center for the Study of Community Colleges, 1985), and in 1984, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) found 76 percent declaring intentions of obtaining a baccalaureate or better (Astin, Green, Korn, and Maier, 1984). The usefulness of these data is limited by the fact that they were obtained from samples of younger students. The CIRP surveys first-time-in-college, full-time freshmen, 90 percent of whom are aged nineteen or younger. The samples in other studies are not as extremely biased, but they usually draw students only from among those taking credit courses and often use the class itself as the unit of sampling, thus skewing the sample in the direction of full-time students.

The form of the question asking transfer intentions also biases the answers. The question is usually asked as "What is

the highest academic degree you intend to obtain?" That suggests a goal to be reached sometime during the person's life. Few young people would acknowledge that they never expect to go further in the education system; it is neither personally nor socially acceptable for them to admit that they have closed off life's options. When the question is changed to "What is the primary reason you are attending this college at this time?," significantly fewer, usually one-third, say that they are in college to prepare for transfer, while one-half say that they are in college to gain occupational skills. Most of the latter group also expect eventually to gain higher degrees but see job entry as their first aim. In fact, many students mark both "bachelor's" as the highest degree they expect to obtain and "gaining occupational skills" as their primary reason for attending. Because they may need the bachelor's degree to enter the occupational field to which they aspire, these seemingly disparate responses are perfectly consistent.

Various studies reveal the proportions of those intending to transfer. According to Illinois Community College Board (1986) figures, in 1968, 56 percent of the community college students in that state declared transfer intent. By 1970, the figure had dropped to 44 percent; in 1974, it was 37 percent; and in 1978, 32 percent of the matriculants declared transfer intention. The Maryland State Board for Community Colleges (1983) found similar proportions: 32 percent in 1974 and 1976; 31 percent in 1978. In a study of 6,500 students entering California community colleges in 1978, 36 percent reported that they intended to transfer, and even among those who designated

transfer as a goal, one-third planned less than a two-year tenure at the community college (Sheldon, 1982). These studies drew samples of all entering students, not just first-time, full-time freshmen.

The only way to determine the primary reason for students attending is to ask them. Instead of asking questions about intentions in a global way, however, we try to be more specific. Rather than ask "What is the highest academic degree that you intend to obtain?," we now word our question as "What is the likelihood of your obtaining a college degree or certificate?," and we designate a time frame with increments from one year to within six years or more. This way of ascertaining goals considers the fact that because few people will forego the option of further education, they often indicate transfer when that is not really a feasible goal.

In fairness to the students, however, the question about the highest degree they intend to obtain does not assess their actual reasons for attending the college. This type of inquiry should not be open-ended but should ask the students about their immediate goals. Furthermore, since students often maintain several goals simultaneously, the question should seek their primary goal by posing a forced choice among alternatives. This type of inquiry must be made on a continual basis so that changes in interest may be recorded, thus forming an important data base.

In some of our later surveys we have also revised the way in which we ask questions regarding the reason for current college attendance. For example, we specify the question noted earlier,

"What is the most important reason that you are attending this college at this time?" Requesting one response, we offer five options: "To prepare for transfer to a four-year college or university;" "To gain skills necessary to enter a new occupation;" "To gain skills necessary to retrain, remain current, or advance in a current occupation;" "To satisfy a personal interest (cultural, social);" and "To improve my English, reading, or math skills." All these response categories have to do with student intent, and this approach commands a current time frame, acknowledging the fact that one's interests may vary over a period of time. It is specific enough to categorize groups of students, and by attaching a time frame, we pin down a goal to a realistic period.

Let me present the results of three surveys conducted by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges to point up the advantage of asking the question in this precise way. One survey was conducted in spring, 1984, at 24 urban colleges that had large minority enrollments. A total of 1500 students in classes that issued transfer credit were asked the question, "What is the primary reason that you are attending college?" The students were instructed to mark only one answer. When asked in this way, 53 percent indicated "Prepare for transfer to a four-year college or university; 32 percent said they wanted to "Gain occupational skills," 15 percent noted "Occupational advancement," and seven percent, "To satisfy personal interest." (Figures are rounded.)

When this question was asked in a much more specific way, the responses were different. We administered a survey in spring, 1986, in randomly selected classes, approximately 90

percent credit and 10 percent noncredit, at 95 randomly selected colleges nationwide. In this sample, 7558 students responded to the question, "What is the most important reason that you are attending this college at this time?" Again, the respondents were requested to make only one answer. The results of this question posed in this more precise way were "To prepare to transfer to a four-year college or university," 36 percent; "To gain skills necessary to enter a new occupation," 34 percent; "To gain skills necessary to retrain, remain current, or advance in a current occupation," 16 percent; "To satisfy a personal interest (cultural, social)," 15 percent; and "To improve my English, reading, or math skills," four percent. (Again, all figures are rounded.)

During spring term, 1987, we surveyed 1284 students enrolled in a random sample of 108 art, music, dance, and theatre classes in 74 community and junior colleges across the nation. Of the 1079 students who responded, half were aged 21 or younger; the modal age was 19. Women comprised 61 percent of the group. Thirty-eight percent were employed for 21 hours or more per week; 31 percent were not employed at all. The ethnic ratio of the sample included 3.3 percent Asian, 7.1 percent Hispanic, and 4.0 percent Black.

When asked to indicate the most important reason that they were attending "this college at this time," 52 percent responded, "To prepare for transfer," 18 percent, "To gain skills necessary to enter a new occupation," and 7 percent, "To gain skills necessary to remain current or advance in a current occupation."

Twenty-two percent were taking college credit classes, "To satisfy a personal interest."

Do students achieve their goals? Data on which answers to this key question may be based can be collected in two ways: cross-sectionally or longitudinally. If cross-sectionally, ask a sample of students who have completed various numbers of units what their goals are and whether they are achieving them. Ask a cohort of college leavers the same questions. Consistency or change variables can be assessed, and various curricular decisions can be made on the basis of the accrued information.

Longitudinally, a sample of entering students can be asked their reasons for attending colleges. The same questions should be solicited each succeeding term to follow up on the previous question. In this way the college has a record of student interaction that can serve as a viable data base. For example, if X number of students declare a desire to obtain occupational training one year, and a smaller number respond in the same way in a subsequent year, college staff might need to ascertain reasons for these changes. Has the student population changed? Is transfer or personal interest becoming more important than job preparation? What types of curricular changes seem necessary to serve a shifting population?

In this way stability in desired outcomes can be assessed -- they change sometimes -- and students can be tracked over several years. In either case, there is a need to understand goals in order to assess outcomes. It is impossible to try to assign causality -- especially not down to the level of single courses, but the data can be viewed in terms of programmatic decisions,

student services, and other factors that colleges can control. The main measure of goal attainment must be based on student outcomes. If you at the institutions can acquire a valid data base on that alone, you will have achieved a major step in assessing student goals and outcomes.

Thank you.

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